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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study on the relation between 6-year-olds' attachment security and their mental representations of attachment relationships are reported. It was expected that infants whose attachment behavior seemed disorganized would be fearful of their attachment figures and experience themselves as helpless, and that these conditions would be clearly reflected in children's symbolic representation of themselves and their relationships at a later age. To test the hypothesis, children's representations of their relationship to their mothers were assessed by means of a semistructured doll play situation in which an adult companion introduced a neutral story and then moved the child through a series of four stories related to attachment. Children's relationships were classified as secure, avoidant, ambivalent, or controlling. Differences between attachment groups' responses to the story themes of separation and reunion are discussed. The doll play of controlling children confirmed predictions based on the conflict behavior of disorganized infants. Secure children expressed separation fears that originated outside the family. These children appeared to have fairly sophisticated cognitive strategies for integrating fears of separation with a successful resolution. Avoidant and ambivalent children seemed to exclude separation fears from their play and consciousness. Fears of controlling children were expressed in a primitive and chaotic way. (RH)

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CONFLICT AND ATTACHMENT: THE EXPERIENCE OF DISORGANIZED/CONTROLLING CHILDREN

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Conflict is often seen as a topic neglected by child development researchers. If this is somewhat less true in the area of attachment, I think it is largely because of Bowlby's efforts to integrate the field with advances in ethology. Ethologists such as Lorenz, Tinbergen, and Hinde to name a few, have had a long history of trying to grapple with the problem of conflict in non-human species. They have identified and described classes of behavior that indicate the presence of internal conflict and they have analyzed the types of situations that tend to elicit conflict. Attachment theorists such as Ainsworth, Sroufe, and most notably, Main, have applied this information to observations of infant behavior and in doing so have added a new dimension to our understanding of attachment phenomena.

An ethologically-informed approach to conflict has been particularly helpful in trying to understand the antecedents of a type of insecure infant-parent attachment relationship which Mary Main and I have recently described from behavior in the strange situation and termed, "insecure-disorganized". These relationships are especially prevalent in samples of maltreating, depressed, and alcoholic mothers. Today I will briefly describe some of the key features of disorganized infant attachments and explain how a consideration of conflict behavior has led to some fruitful hypotheses about the developmental origins of this attachment group. I will next describe preliminary findings from a study which Carol George and I have been conducting on the relation between children's attachment security at age 6 and their mental representations of those relationships as revealed in doll play. These data give strong support to inferences about disorganized

attachments based on an analysis of infant conflict behavior in the strange situation.

A number of investigators using the strange situation, especially with high-risk samples, have for some time noted the presence of infants who were unclassifiable using Ainsworth's system. A few years ago, Main and I decided to take a careful look at the unclassifiable infants in her middle-class sample. We wondered if this heterogeneous group could somehow be divided into clear, new attachment categories. We did not find such categories, but instead found these infants to be characterized by a diverse and often confusing array of behavior. These behaviors could sometimes seem bizarre or inappropriate in the circumstances.

For example,

• one infant approached the mother by creeping backwards on her stomach with her face averted.

• another infant leaned toward the mother while standing at her knees, but his movements seemed unnatural as though he were leaning toward and pushing away from her at the same time. He moved as if he were underwater.

• another infant placed his hands over his mouth, bowed his head and fell prone, crying. Held on mother's lap, he bowed his head and stilled completely for almost a minute.

The behavior of some infants seemed to reflect a kind of temporal disorganization. For example, some would be extremely

distressed and angry on separation, very much the way an ambivalent baby is. They would then show sharp and prolonged avoidance of the parent on reunion. In addition, we noted direct indices of fear, confusion, and depression in some infants.

It would be possible to view these behaviors as simply noise or simply bizarre or pathological. The first explanation would lead the observer to ignore the disturbing behavior or to drop those infants from the sample as a number of investigators have done. The second would be consistent with the finding that infants whose attachment behavior seems disorganized are most prevalent in high risk populations. This association, however, does not give much insight into the interactional history that might lead to disorganization.

Ethologists' insights regarding conflict behavior, however, provided one of the keys to understanding disorganization and its etiology. Ethologists are often confronted with animal behavior that seems arbitrary, odd, or inexplicable in the circumstances. They have found that such behavior often occurs in situations in which two or more competing motives or behavioral tendencies are known to be aroused. In many cases these are situations in which a single stimulus or social partner elicits these competing tendencies.

Upon analysis many of the behaviors shown by the unclassifiable infants indeed seem to reflect either high levels of conflict between the tendencies to seek proximity, to avoid and/or resist the parent or complete mutual inhibition of behavioral systems. This view of disorganized behavior is key precisely because it leads us to ask,

"What are the competing motives that are being aroused in this situation?"; and

"What is it about the history of interaction with the parent that engenders these conflicts?"

Main and Hesse have recently developed a hypothesis that begins to address these questions. They have argued that disorganized infants have experienced their parents as unpredictably or inexplicably frightening. Since the attachment system is organized so that fearful stimuli in general activate attachment behavior, these infants are placed in a particularly poignant and unresolvable conflict--their haven of safety is also a source of alarm.

Direct evidence of conflict frequently is visible in the behavior of avoidant and ambivalent infants as well. However, an underlying organizing strategy or goal is always apparent in the behavior of these infants. In Main's terms, the strategy of the avoidant infant is to minimize attention to attachment-related stimuli, while the strategy of the ambivalent infant is to maximize attention to the same stimuli. It is precisely this absence of an underlying coherence or goal that characterizes infants classified as disorganized. This suggests to us that in addition to fear these infants also experience feelings of helplessness, since none of the behavioral strategies available to them can bring relief, or in Sroufe and Water's terms, felt security.

To this point we have been using the infant's conflict

behavior as a window into his subjective experience. If indeed this approach is an appropriate one, then the hypothesis that disorganized infants are fearful of their attachment figure and experience themselves as helpless, should be clearly reflected in children's symbolic representations of themselves and their relationships at a later age.

Carol George and I are attempting to test this in a study we are currently conducting of the mother-child attachment relationship at age 6. We are particularly interested in the links between mothers' and children's mental representations of their mutual relationship. Mothers and children are seen in a laboratory session. Mothers' representations are assessed through a semi-clinical caregiving interview in which they are asked to describe their relationship with the child. To assess children's representations of their relationship to mother, we administer a slightly modified version of Bretherton and Ridgeway's Attachment Story Completion Tasks. This is a semi-structured doll play situation in which an adult companion introduces a neutral story and then moves the child through a series of four attachment-related stories. Children complete the stories using a set of dolls and a simplified doll house. In addition, mother-child attachment relationships are classified from the child's behavior upon reunion following a one-hour separation. Classifications into four groups -- secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and controlling -- are made using criteria developed by Main and Cassidy. We would like to emphasize that Main and Cassidy report that children classified as disorganized in infancy are classified as controlling at age six. In contrast to disorganized infants, controlling children

attempt to regulate the parents' behavior either by acting in a punitive or humiliating manner, or by trying to cheer or give care to the parent.

We are currently in the process of developing a scoring system for the child's doll play from a pilot sample of 17 middle-class kindergarteners and their mothers from the Mills College Children's School.

For the remainder of today's talk I will focus on what we have learned so far from our work with the doll play. I would like to emphasize that our conclusions must be considered preliminary. In particular, we decided to approach analyses of the doll play with knowledge about the child's reunion classification and the mother's responses to the caregiving interview. We began by classifying attachment relationships from reunion behavior. We then complied detailed narrative descriptions and verbatim transcripts of the children's doll play. Next we examined the doll-play transcripts with an eye to finding patterns and commonality in themes among children receiving a similar classification. Although our predictions were theoretically guided, our procedure allows the data to reveal important differences between attachment groups that would have been missed had we relied entirely on a priori assumptions. Note that we do not have longitudinal attachment data on our sample. We have reason to believe, however, that the controlling relationships in our sample are indeed the age-six counterparts to disorganized infant attachment relationships.

We have examined in detail children's responses to two of the attachment-related stories, those dealing specifically with the themes of separation and reunion. In these stories a babysitter is

introduced to care for the children while the parents go away overnight. First I would like to describe the content of these stories. The salient characteristics of the doll play of each attachment group are listed in the following figure (1). Secure children depicted the babysitter as actively involved with them during the parents' absence. In addition, somewhat to our surprise, all secure children told a story that included a dangerous and even frightening event. For example, robbers come to the house; the house catches on fire; the children get lost. However, in every case the children resolved these events. They depicted competent adults, for example the babysitter, a policeman, the returning parents, as coming to the rescue. In some cases, the child depicted himself as taking the initiative in calling upon the adults. The characteristic theme upon reunion was resolution and reintegration of the family, for example, family members hug, the family takes a vacation together. This was always enacted immediately upon or shortly after the parents returned. In summary, secure children express separation fears and and also express confidence in the competent support of adult caregivers.

The themes of avoidant and ambivalent children did not conform to the pattern evident in the secure children. Note that there were only a few avoidant and ambivalent children in our pilot sample. Neither group of children expressed separation fears. Rather, the scenarios of both groups depicted somewhat stereotyped views of household activities. Avoidant children depicted affectively neutral or slightly unpleasant interactions between children and babysitter. Ambivalent children enacted stories in which caregiving and comforting were predominant. The

characteristic theme upon reunion for both groups was the absence of family reintegration. Avoidant children reunited the family after considerable delay. Ambivalent children depicted only an initial warm greeting. The greeting did not however lead to a true family reintegration.

Now let us consider the controlling children. We expected to find evidence that the children experienced their parents as frightening and themselves as helpless. Nevertheless, we were surprised at the intensity with which these themes emerged in the children's doll play. Four of the five children saw the parents as a direct source of threat. In contrast to the themes of secure children where frightening events originate outside the family, the frightening themes of controlling children originated from the parents. For example, the parents were abusive or violent toward the child; the parent's car went out of control and destroyed the house. Again in contrast to secure children, controlling children depicted other adults who might potentially be of help as physically or psychologically unavailable or abusive. For example, the babysitter gets sick and leaves the house to go to the hospital, or the sitter punishes the child by sending him to jail. The children depicted themselves as helpless to control their own behavior or the events around them. For example, one boy attacked the babysitter. In another case toys flew around the house wildly out of control and destroyed it. One child covered helplessly in the basement as his parents' returned. The characteristic theme upon reunion was family disintregration. For example, in one case the mother died and the rest of the family left the house. The self was left all alone, and eventually decided to leave as well.

The doll play of the fifth child had a different quality from the other controlling children. She was passive, nervous, and unwilling to show any action. Occasionally she looked sad and subdued. Her behavior suggested that she was holding back a great deal of unhappiness. It called to mind quite strongly the total inhibition of action of some infants classified as disorganized.

Three of the children received intermediate classifications, that is, they were basically secure or avoidant but showed some signs of controlling behavior. The doll play themes were a blend that was consistent with their intermediate classifications.

Clearly the controlling children in our pilot sample confirm predictions based on the type and degree of conflict behavior shown by disorganized infants. The fear and helplessness depicted are especially surprising and worrisome considering that this is not a clinical sample. Yet disorganization is not strongly evident in the reunion behavior of these children with their mothers. By definition, these children more or less consistently use a strategy of subtle emotional control of the mother. Can it be said then that by age six these children are no longer disorganized?? Our initial review of the structural aspects of their doll play suggest that at least on the level of mental representation they are still disorganized.

The doll play scenarios of the secure children have the quality of a classic fairy tale. The story begins simply, the cause of a potential danger is developed, there is a climax, and a resolution of the problem through the intercession of kindly and competent adults. Finally, there is a reunification of the child with his family. The tales of avoidant and ambivalent children

lack drama, but are essentially coherent. In contrast, the scenarios of the controlling children are chaotic, irrational, and unpredictable. Disaster arises out of nowhere. If explanations are given for these disasters, they are given after the fact and involve magical objects or animals. Scenarios end in total disaster or are not really completed at all. In short the stories of controlling children have much more the quality of a nightmare than a fairy tale. In their absence of a coherent structure or organization these "narratives" strongly resemble the attachment behavior of the disorganized infant, which by definition appears to lack purpose, meaning or goal.

I would like to read a portion of a transcript of one of the controlling children to give you the flavor of what we are seeing.

"And see, and then, you know what happens? Their whole house blows up. Uh, I'm outside so I don't get blown up. See. Oh. They get destroyed and not even their bones are left. Nobody can even get their bones. Look. I'm jumpin' on a rock. ... This rock feels slippery. Guess what? This is a big hill. And guess what? The hills are alive, the hills are shakin' and shakin'. Because they are alive... Ohhh! I fall smack off a hill. And got bloved up in an explosion."

Let me now summarize questions raised in our minds by the doll play. First, the content of the doll play of controlling children confirms our predictions based on the conflict behavior of disorganized infants. It is also consistent with what we presently know about the interactional histories of these children.

The doll play doesn't simply mirror the child's experience, however, but presumably also reveals something about the way these children process attachment-related information.

Secure children appear to experience their fears of separation during fantasy play and to have fairly sophisticated cognitive strategies for integrating these fears with a successful resolution. Avoidant and ambivalent children seem to exclude separation fears from their play and we believe from their consciousness as well.

In contrast, fears relating to their attachment figures and to separation arise quite readily in the fantasy play of controlling children. These are expressed in a primitive and chaotic way. These observations raise the questions, "Why can't controlling children exclude frightening content from their symbolic representations as the avoidant and ambivalent children do?"; and, "Why does this content emerge in such chaotic, disorganized ways?" Clearly, it is too early to give definitive answers to these questions, but there are at least two mechanisms that we feel warrant further interest. First, extrapolating from Main's fear hypothesis, controlling children may be caught in a kind of processing loop driven by fear of the parent. That is, thoughts of the parent are frightening, but the child cannot stop thinking about the parent because the more frightened he is, the more his thoughts are forced to return to the attachment figure. The second mechanism is linked to cognitive mastery of material that cannot easily be assimilated. We know from our caregiving interviews that the mothers of controlling children act in irrational and unpredictable ways. The child is driven to rework these

experiences in order to extract their meaning. As a result, material intrudes into fantasy without first being screened by higher information processing structures. Whatever the underlying mechanisms are, it is likely that controlling children continue to suffer from the distress produced by the conflict between the frightening parent they have known and the wished-for parent who is a haven of safety.

DOLL PLAY THEMES
SEPARATION AND REUNION

Classification

	B n=5	*A* n=2	*C* n=3	*D* n=5
Themes	danger & rescue	ordinary: daily & household	ordinary: caring & comforting	catastrophe & helplessness
Role of Adults	available, competent	neutral, adequate	affectionate	frightening unavailable
Quality of Reunion	re-integration	non-integration	non-integration	dis-integration

N=17, 2 cases received intermediate classifications